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From whistle-blowing to high-powered rhetoric: the language of mediation in the 2000 U.S. presidential debates

Donna Andréolle

A brief look at history

1 It no longer remains to be proven that the American media has played a central role in every U.S. presidential campaign since the advent of TV, and in particular since the ground-breaking use Eisenhower made of television in the presidential campaign of 1952 with the invention of political advertising; this was followed by the magnification of television's role in Presidential elections with the first televised debates between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 (Donovan & Scherer, 1992: 226). Television today contributes in at least four different ways to the mediation of candidates' rhetoric and image-making in any given electoral year:

- through its coverage of official campaign speeches, the Conventions and other political events;
- through its own analysis of the campaign in nightly news programs as well as in specialized shows featuring in-depth studies of the candidates, reality checks on ads and campaign promises, etc.;
- through the broadcasting of each candidate's campaign ads both positive and negative;
- through active collaboration with the Commission on Presidential Debates in the organizing and broadcasting of the presidential and vice-presidential debates.

2 Debating is not a twentieth-century campaign invention; it has always been part of the American political landscape. Lincoln, for example, was known to be an articulate public debater. Nevertheless, mid-twentieth century politics were marked significantly by the

"institutionalisation" of debates starting in 1960. But mediated confrontations between Presidential candidates and those candidates' use of the media for campaign purposes is a complex affair, the regulation of which dates back to the Federal Communications Act of 1934 which stated that if broadcasters allowed a political candidate to use their stations, the latter had to give equal time opportunities to all other candidates for that office. Since this provision was viewed by many as the only way to limit undue influence of the networks on political campaigns, various Congressional efforts to overturn the equal time law failed repeatedly between 1959 and 1975. Presidential candidates were able to evoke the equal time law to avoid debating, as was the case in 1964 (the Johnson/Goldwater race) and in 1968 when Nixon demanded that third-party candidate George Wallace be allowed to debate, condition refused by Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey (Alexander & Margolis 1978: 18-20).

3 There have been presidential and vice-presidential debates in every other election campaign since 1976; the television audience for a presidential debate can vary from about 50 to 90 million viewers depending on the election. The highest viewer rating in recent presidential campaigns is 89 million for the town hall debate between Clinton, Bush and Perot in 1992, the lowest rating was for Clinton's re-election in 1996 with only 36 million viewers watching the Clinton vs. Dole town hall debate. Until 1992, the most classic form of debating in the U.S. presidential campaigns was extremely academic, with the opponents standing behind podiums facing the public and a panel usually composed of experts in various fields plus a well-known anchorman serving as the "moderator". In this system the opponents never speak directly to each other, but respond to questions asked by the panelists or are allowed a short rebuttal to statements made by the other candidate. What makes this different from other forms of political campaigning – speeches, interviews, advertising– is that the locus of control shifts from the politician himself to the reporter/mediator: because of the comparative setting of the debate, and of the agenda being determined by the mediator, the candidates lose the control over political communication that they possess in other circumstances (Chaffee & Dennis 1979: 79). They therefore cannot, for example, escape the possibility that a "no-win" issue (such as pro-life vs. pro-choice) will be raised, and there is no way they can prevent such an issue from being introduced into the debate (without, in any case, being accused of wanting to manipulate the media). This means, of course, that the candidates are carefully prepared for the debates months in advance, which also contributes to a certain lack of spontaneity more typical of French-style face-to-face political confrontations.

The language of mediation (1)

4 There has been one significant change in the American political debating style since the 1992 election when the Clinton campaign introduced the "open format" debate now called the "town hall" format, in which a group of uncommitted voters ask the questions formerly asked by the panelists. This shift in mediation from journalistic specialists to prospective voters illustrates social science research findings on the importance of the debates as a means by which undecided or "swing" voters choose a Presidential candidate based on the candidates' comparative answers to specific key issues. (Chaffee & Dennis

1979: 76) In the 2000 election, there were three different debates, each with a specific format:

- ***Debate 1*** formal, academic style with candidates standing at podiums and a moderator asking questions;
- ***Debate 2*** informal or "conversational" format with candidates sitting at a table with the moderator;
- ***Debate 3*** town hall format with candidates standing on an open stage answering questioners in the audience designated by the moderator.

5 Before treating the actual language production of the debates, it is useful to define exactly what the moderator is and how he is expected to function within the limits of each debate format. On the surface, the moderator is expected above all to function as a referee: he announces the rules of the debate as elaborated and agreed upon by the candidates and the Commission on Presidential Debates; he is responsible for enforcing those rules if need be during the exchanges; he controls who speaks and when ("turn-giving"), an important function since the candidates are not allowed to speak to each other directly; and finally, he asks questions of clarification. In this neutral role of referee, we can observe the predominance of what can be called "the language of whistle-blowing", that is, language production related directly to announcing, enforcing and reiterating the rules. Such language consists of curt and to-the-point phrases, with the dominant structure being that of the ellipse. The most recurrent forms express the moderator's authority to grant speaking time, for example "Governor Bush, one minute rebuttal"/"Vice President Gore, 2 minutes" or signal the end of the discussion on a given topic by announcing "New subject, new question". These types of intervention, in which the moderator is little more than a talking clock, vary in percentage of occurrence; it is possible thus to establish a correlation between such enunciative patterns and the format itself (see Table 1). In the formal, academic debate, ellipses expressing enforcement of the rules account for 70% of the moderator's language activity, as opposed to only 20% in the informal, "conversational" format and 50% in the town hall format. Obviously, once the moderator's role is no longer exclusively that of the referee, as is the case for example in the conversational debate format, the moderator's language resembles that of a normal participant in a dialogue or conversation, for example "Did he state your position correctly, you're not calling for eliminating sanctions are you?" or "Hold on one second. What is the misunderstanding? Let's clear this up". Even the utterances related to rule enforcement take on a natural conversational tone which can end in a joking exchange such as:

> **MODERATOR**: Both of you have now violated the rules. Hold that thought.
> **GORE**: I've been trying hard not to
> **MODERATOR**: I know, I know. But under you all's rules you are not allowed to ask each other questions. I let you do it a minute ago.
> **BUSH**: Twice.
> **MODERATOR**: Now, you just – twice, sorry.
> **GORE**: That's an interruption by the way.
> **MODERATOR**: That's an interruption, okay. But anyhow, you just did it now so –
> **BUSH**: I'm sorry, I apologize Mr. Vice President.
> **MODERATOR**: You aren't allowed to do that either, see? (LAUGHTER) (Source: Debate transcripts, Commission on Presidential Debates, http://www.debates.org)

Table 1. Comparative analysis of debate format and type of moderator intervention

Debate format	**Rules announced**	**Moderator's role (as announced)**	**Number of moderator interventions**	**% of interventions used for enforcing rules**
Formal (October 3 2000)	Candidates standing at podiums No answer can exceed 2 minutes Rebuttal limited to 1 minute Candidates may not question each other directly 2 minutes for closing statements No opening statements Audience to remain silent	Option to follow up and extend any question give or take 3 and a half minutes Questions and subjects chosen by me alone	58	70% (30% refer to time)
Conversational (October 11 2000)	Informal, conversational with the 2 candidates sitting at a table with the moderator No single response can ever exceed 2 minutes The audience is always to remain absolutely silent	Only the subjects and the questions are mine	108	20%

Town hall (October 17 2000)	Questions asked by voters identified as being uncommitted Questioners shall not ask follow-up questions or otherwise participate in the extended discussion Questioner's microphone will be turned off after he or she completes asking the question No single answer can exceed 2 minutes Audience has promised to remain silent	My job was to decide the order the questions will be asked and call on questioners accordingly I also have the option of asking follow-ups. For the record I plan to do it sparingly and mostly for clarifications	65	50% (30% deal with turn-giving)

6 If we delve deeper into the relationship between the moderator and the debate participants, it is interesting to observe how the moderator positions himself in reality in different exchanges. Although he is theoretically objective and only a facilitator in this rather unnatural form of verbal exchange –which resembles a double monologue more than a dialogue– closer scrutiny of certain exchanges tends to illustrate a more active, subjective presence on the moderator's part. In fact, the moderator plays several roles which vary with the circumstances. First and foremost as a referee, he makes active decisions as to when the rules can be "bent" and negotiates the terms of the rule-bending with the candidates: an example here would be in the first debate when the moderator declares: "I have an idea. If you have any more to say about this, you can say it in your closing statements and we'll move on, okay?" Expressions used for enforcing rules and turn-giving are modulated to fit the general tone and atmosphere : in the town hall debate, the moderator puts an end to one of Gore's responses with "Speaking of keepers of the score card, that's what I'm trying to do here"; in the conversational debate, turn-giving phrases include "I want to see if he buys that", "Is that on your radar screen?"; and a surprising use of irony can be noted at the end of the formal debate with "On that wonderful note of disagreement, we have to stop now [...]"! Secondly, in an effort to gain the TV viewers' confidence and involvement in the questions he asks the candidates, the moderator positions himself as self-designated spokesperson of the American voter: in the formal debate he begins several questions with "How should **the voters** decide...?" and "How would you advise **the voters** to make a decision?" This proves, among other things, the media's full awareness of its role in providing voters with vital information concerning candidates and that voters depend on the media to furnish such information during the Presidential campaign.

7 As the debate format becomes more informal, one can sense a subtle shift in how the moderator involves himself in the exercise –whereas reference to voters is restrained in

the first debate to the use of the third person singular or plural, in debates 2 and 3 the moderator includes himself within the sphere of those concerned by the issues at hand, indicated by the increasingly frequent intrusions of the first person plural in his questions, for example "Do you think **we**'re meeting **our** obligations?" or an interesting reiteration in the question "Vice President Gore, do you agree with the governor's views on nation building, the use *of military, **our** military*, for nation building as he described and defined it?" Last but not least, the moderator at times becomes so involved in the process of relaying questions back and forth between the candidates (because remember, they can't speak to each other directly!) that he becomes an active participant in the debate, thus losing his objectivity as a neutral referee; in this shift of speaker status, the moderator goes as far as making value judgements on subjects not raised by his own questions. As one particular exchange in the last minutes of the conversational debate illustrates, the moderator spontaneously, and out of context, broaches the subject of negative campaign ads and mud-slinging strategies:

> **MODERATOR** (to Bush): Your folks are saying some awful things.
> **BUSH**: I hope they're not awful things. I think they may be using the man's own words.
> **MODERATOR**: Well, I mean calling him a serial exaggerator...
> **BUSH**: I don't believe I've used those words.
> **MODERATOR**: No, but your campaign ads.
> **BUSH**: Maybe they have.
> **MODERATOR**: And your campaign officials have. And your campaign officials, Mr. Vice President, are now calling the governor a bumbler.

8 Thus from whistle-blowing to value judgements *via* the active roles of decision-maker and negotiator, the moderator must master the art of mediating the boundaries that separate the impartial referee from subjective defender of the American people while maintaining his image of the astute, well-informed newsman. As a final note here one can find it a contradiction in terms that so much attention is paid to following rules and delegating precise times of response and rebuttal in a country where political opinion is shaped on the one hand by 45-second campaign ads in which anything goes in terms of accusations or name-calling, and on the other hand by the ritual sound bites of the nightly news through which the media controls what most voters will hear and remember about the candidates.

The language of mediation (2)

9 Such considerations concerning how political opinion is actually shaped in the U.S. Presidential elections brings us to the second part of this paper which will now deal with the central figures of the debates –the Presidential candidates– and how they negotiate the mediation of their televisual image within the fluctuating conditions imposed by three different debate formats. First of all it, is important to remember how low voter participation in American Presidential elections can be, and the fact that many people vote along party lines, even though this tendency would appear to be on the decline in recent elections. Most Americans derive their opinions of the candidates from watching television[1] —not only from the debates, or the specialized news programs, but also (and primarily) from two specific forms of campaign coverage that reduce the essence of each candidate into small, digestible pieces: the "sound bites" of the day, and political commercials. Most frequent in the heat of the Presidential race between September and

election day in November, sound bites are utterances which may vary in length from a few words to a full sentence or two contained in a candidate's speech or interview of the day, selected by the press and reused in the nightly report on the progression of each candidate's campaign, his reactions to remarks by his opponent's camp and so on. It is important to know here that the candidates are not the poor innocent victims of this system; they know the rules of the game and play accordingly, by including in their daily discourse catch phrases that are likely to be selected as sound bites by the media.

10 Where do these catchy phrases come from? Basically from campaign commercials, which constitute the form of American **political discourse** most used by the candidates and most widely-received by American voters. Whereas the "hottest" televized debate will only be viewed by about 90 million people as noted at the beginning of this paper, a 45-second campaign spot broadcast during the commercial break of a prime time sit-com or football game will be viewed by twice that many potential voters. A dozen showings of that same spot will invariably have far more impact on a viewer than a 90-minute debate, not to mention the fact that seeing the commercial is not a voluntary act, while tuning into a debate is. In fact, campaign ads "because of their brevity and unpredictable (by the viewer's standards) scheduling, are equally likely to be seen by opponents, supporters and neutrals whereas people who are disinterested in politics, or unfavorable to one candidate, will avoid a scheduled program." (Comstock 1989: 127)

11 The candidate is thus faced with a challenge in the debate: how will he attract voter attention and promote a specific image that has been carefully built –and at great expense– through TV ads? The answer, of course, is by embedding "sound bite-able" phrases and actual slogans from ads in the answers given to the moderator's questions while sounding natural. This may appear a daunting task, but in fact is quite easy for the experienced politician. Although candidates do not know what questions will be asked by the moderator, the themes of the questions are predictable, since the issues of the campaign are the object of daily news coverage and opinion (or "tracking") polls. In addition, when the debates take place the candidates have been making speeches for months –during the primaries, at the national Conventions and in the fall campaign. The candidates in fact will respond to questions in ways that have already worked well, thanks to their accumulated experience in speech making, press conferences and debate rehearsals. (Caffee & Dennis 1979: 78) If we look for surface evidence of the correlation between the predictability of being asked about certain issues and the occurrence of catch phrases in the candidates' responses, we can observe the following: in debates 1 and 3, recurrent catch phrases dealing with domestic issues such as education, taxes or health care reform occur in almost every answer to a question, even though the formats of these two debates are diametrically opposed. In the informal debate, however, there are no catch phrases whatsoever, partly because the format is "conversational" rather than the formal response/rebuttal style, but also because the questions are related to less discussed topics such as foreign policy, American military intervention abroad, special rights for gays and protection of the environment.

Table 2. Recurrent catch phrases used by candidates during the debates (both positive and negative)

Campaign theme	Al Gore	George W. Bush

Economy	***Will we be better off four years from now than we are today?***	
Education		An education system that leaves no child behind
Health care and social security	Keep Medicare in a lockbox Keep Social Security in an iron lockbox	It's Medi-scare
Government and governing capacities		I want to empower the people I trust the people, I don't trust the federal government **It's who you trust, the government or the people** **Working across the partisan divide** (10 times)
Ability to lead as the future commander-in-chief	I served my country in Vietnam (3 times)	To rebuild the military Flanked by Colin Powell and General Norman Schwartzkopf
Taxes	**Tax cuts for the wealthiest 1% (12 times**)	Give money back to the people who pay the bills The hard-working people of America's money
Character issues	We ought to attack our country's problems, not each other	They've moved that sign "The buck stops here" from the Oval Office desk to "The buck stops here" on the Lincoln bedroom.
Abortion	A woman's right to choose	To promote the culture of life/to promote the value of life

12 Table 2 shows the most pertinent examples of these catch phrases and the campaign issues that they address. This is not an exhaustive list from the debates, but the phrases listed are significant indicators of how American political discourse in a campaign situation belongs to a vaster **network of intertextual reference**. In particular, what can be seen in Table 2 are two phenomena. First, we can note the most frequent catch phrase used by each candidate and which denotes what could be called that candidate's pet subject and/or the *leitmotif* of his campaign. For Al Gore the phrase is "tax cuts for the wealthiest 1%" (of American taxpayers, he means), which he uses each time he wants to attack George W. Bush's tax plan. This specific phrase is used twelve different times, including three times in one two-minute response to a question on the subject. Besides being a phrase taken directly from a negative ad broadcast on national television, this phrase also recalls Clinton's negative ad campaign against George Bush (senior) in 1992

and which helped him win the election. Although this networking of political ad phrases and slogans may seem strange, even improbable, to French voters who are not exposed to this type of campaigning, an American voter has been exposed dozens of times to these ads every time he or she watches television, and American TV culture is such that the voter understands this reference to another Presidential election and will associate it — consciously or unconsciously— with the outcome of that election. As for George W. Bush, the preferential phrase is "working across the partisan divide" or a variation on this theme such as "I've been working with both Republicans and Democrats", used ten times and in responses to various questions to promote his image as a "uniter, not a divider" (another catch phrase variation of this *leitmotif*). Again, the American voter recognizes in these chosen expressions the profile of the challenger and of the candidate with no previous experience in federal government, like Bill Clinton in 1992 or Jimmy Carter in 1976 for whom the highest office held before becoming President was governor. Such candidates systematically attack the federal government and pose as the champions of government for the people, by the people as declared in the Constitution, while the opponent, in most cases the sitting President or the current Vice President, must attack the challenger on the basis of his inexperience in the handling of national and international issues.

13 The second phenomenon is the occurrence of the two phrases "Will we be better off four years from now than we are today?" (spoken by Gore) and "It's who you trust, the government or the people" (spoken by Bush). These are campaign ad slogans, not of the 2000 elections but of the 1988 and 1992 elections. The phrase used by Gore was in fact first pronounced by Ronald Reagan in his 1980 debate against President Carter (Shapiro 1992: 19) but was used by George Bush senior in a 1988 spot in which he says "If you elect me President, you will be better off four years from now than you are today"; this same phrase –and the passage from the 1988 Bush ad– were used against Bush by Clinton in a negative ad during the 1992 race. George W.'s phrase, on the other hand, was used by Clinton in many ads and speeches of his 1992 campaign when Clinton (like George W. in 2000) was the governor of a Southern state with no connections in Washington, promising to beat big government and "empower the people" –another catch phrase used by George W. in 2000. Thus these phrases can be situated in a larger network of candidate name-recognition strategies, with their effectiveness mainly based on the listener's skill at recognizing them and reconnecting them to the context of other Presidential races and their respective outcomes. It must not be forgotten that this act of recognition functions as a form of adherence to what is being said, in the same way that humor, *double entendre* and other linguistic artifices of advertizing are used to elicit the listener's approbation.

14 The candidates also use other forms of linguistic mediation in the building of their public image: one such technique is to add the occasional personal note to show that they are ordinary, God-fearing Americans. One of the most obvious forms of personalization is mentioning the family in endearing ways, or sometimes even to serve the purpose of self-ridicule; in sociolinguistic terms, such personalization of the message is a strategy for increasing audience involvement. (Gumpertz 1982: 195) Two striking examples of these two ploys in the 2000 debates are as follows: in the first debate, Al Gore announced "Tipper and I have four children, and God bless them, every one of them decided on their own to come here this evening"; in the third debate, Bush declared "When I campaigned [in the race for the governorship of Texas], a lot of folks didn't think I could win including, by the way, my mother". Such remarks may well serve another objective as

well, that of making the public laugh, since laughter constitutes a mediating factor which bridges the gap between the politician and the voter he is attempting to woo. This is of particular interest in the debates where the occasional piece of wit gives comic relief from the formal environment and rhetoric.

15 Last but not least, as language is a central mediating element in the construction of his public image, each candidate must master a wide range of linguistic registers going from standard language to dialect. According to sociolinguist Sylvie Moosmuller

> The use of standard language variants is most often associated with intelligence, competence and status-related traits, whereas dialect language variants are generally associated with sociability, social attractiveness and trustworthiness. This implies that a 'flexible' language use, ranging from standard to dialect, should be part of the politician's repertoire, if he/she wants to address as many groups of electors as possible. (1989: 141)

16 Such ranges of speech variants can be remarked in the closing remarks made by the two Presidential candidates at the end of the third debate and which we have reproduced below.

> **GORE**: Thank you very much, Jim, and I'll begin by answering your questions –your last question. I believe that a lot of people are skeptical about people in politics today because we have seen a time of great challenge for our country. Since the assassination of our best leaders in the '60's, since the Vietnam War, since Watergate, and because we need campaign finance reform. (1)
> I would like to tell you something about me. I keep my word. I have kept the faith. I have kept the faith with my country. I volunteered for the Army. I served in Vietnam. I kept the faith with my family. Tipper and I have been married for 30 years. We have devoted ourselves to our children and now our nearly one-and-a-half-year-old grandson. I have kept the faith with our country. Nine times I have raised my hand to take an oath to the Constitution, and I have never violated that oath. I have not spent the last quarter century in pursuit of personal wealth. I have spent the last quarter century fighting for middle-class working men and women in the United States of America. I believe very deeply that you have to be willing to stand up and fight no matter what powerful forces might be on the other side. (2)
> If you want somebody who is willing to fight for you, I am asking for your support and your vote and, yes, your confidence and your willingness to believe that we can do the right thing in America, and be the better for it. We've made some progress during the last eight years. We have seen the strongest economy in the history of the United States. (3)
> Lower crime rates for eight years in a row. Highest private home ownership ever, but I'll make you one promise here. You ain't seen nothing yet. And I will keep that promise. (4)

17 For the purposes of our demonstration, Gore's closing statement has been divided into four "movements" in which language production moves progressively from the standard variant of the well-educated and knowledgeable statesman making reference to history and to the importance of the political issues at stake (1), to a more personalized form of expression in (2) and (3), as the sentences become shorter and less complex when he evokes his life as a husband, father and citizen. Finally in the last movement (4) we can note the use of elliptical phrases and then the surprisingly substandard "You ain't seen nothing yet" to illustrate his closeness to the middle-class Americans he has promised to defend throughout the campaign.

We have also divided George W.'s closing statement into four similar movements:

> **BUSH**: Well, Jim, I want to thank you and thank the folks here at Washington University and the vice president. Appreciate the chance to have a good, honest dialogue about our differences of opinion. (1)
> I think after three debates the good people of this country understand there is a difference of opinion. There is a difference between big federal government and somebody who is coming from outside of Washington who will trust individuals. I've got an agenda that I want to get done for the country. (2)
> It's an agenda that says we're going to reform Medicare to make sure seniors have got prescription drugs and to give seniors different options from which they can choose. It's an agenda that says we're listen to the young voices in Social Security and say we're going to think differently about making sure we have a system, but also fulfil the promise to the seniors in America. A promise made will be a promise kept should I be fortunate enough to become your president. I want to have the military keeping the peace. I want to make sure the public school system in America keeps its promise so not one child is left behind. After setting priorities, I want to give some of your money back. I don't think the surplus is the government's money. I think it's the people's money. I don't think it exists because of the ingenuity and hard work of the federal government, I think in exists because of the ingenuity and hard work of the American people. And you ought to have some of this surplus so you can save and dream and build. (3)
> I look forward to the final weeks of this campaign. I'm asking for your vote. For those of you for me, thanks for your help. For those of you for my opponent, please only vote once. (LAUGHTER) But for those who have not made up their mind, I would like to conclude by this promise. Should I be fortunate enough to become your president, when I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to not only uphold the laws of the land, but I will also swear to uphold the honor and the dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God. Thank you very much. (4)

18 Bush, unlike Gore, cashed in extensively on his warm "deep South" gentility throughout the campaign, and so capitalized on this social attractiveness in the debates whenever possible. Besides carefully maintaining his rather strong Texan accent (which includes the systematic dropping of the **g** in the -ing ending in favor of the more colloquial -in'), the first movement of Bush's closing statement remains down-to-earth ("the folks"/the ellipse of the subject in the sentence "Appreciate the chance..."). Movements 2 and 3, which sum up his campaign promises, are delivered in the fashion of a structured oralized - i.e. written to be spoken - campaign speech, with the use of repeated opening phrases ("it's an agenda that ..."/ "I want to ..."/"I don't think ... I think") and an occasional catch phrase such as "so not one child is left behind" in movement 2. But where Bush's elocutionary force becomes most evident is in the final movement of the closing statement, in which he is both able to surprise by cracking a joke ("For those of you for my opponent, vote only once"), appeal to the highly conservative religious right (reference to the Bible) and make direct criticism of Clinton's behavior without ever mentioning his name ("to uphold the honor and the dignity of the office to which I have been elected"). This last statement, because it ends with the ritual formula "so help me God" –the ritualistic ending to the President's oath of office– gives the listener the impression that he/she is actually hearing Bush being sworn in.

19 Such image mediation *via* carefully rehearsed discourse is necessary in the American politician's repertoire, especially in the Presidential elections. All in all, the televized debates of American Presidential campaigns can be seen as producing both eufunctional and dysfunctional results (Chaffee and Dennis 1979: 97). The eufunctional result of the debates resides in the way debates exemplify free political competition, with the parties in direct confrontation and the national audience as judge. The dramatization of the

American democratic system, relayed by television –the primary vehicle of popular culture– can help restore public confidence in the government, especially in times of political crisis. Nonetheless, these positive aspects may be overshadowed by the dysfunctional results of the debates: on the one hand, televized debates reinforce the "star system", by focusing the nation's attention on two candidates and their "horserace" for a single office, thus effacing the importance of other levels of government, other candidates, other issues and even the political parties behind these races. Chaffee & Dennis go so far as to conclude that

> The historical tendencies toward concentration of power in the federal government, especially the executive branch, and the general decline of public enthusiasm for the major parties seem to be exacerbated by the personalization of politics inherent in the debate format. (1979: 98)

20 The way in which candidates mediate this "personalization of politics" through specifically constructed discourse will continue to fuel another debate, that of the media's responsibility in the ever-growing Tower of Babel of American elections and political life.

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NOTES

1. A more recent form of campaigning is that of the candidate website used extensively for the first time by all the major candidates (including third parties) in the 2000 election. Future studies

should reveal if the Internet as political medium is capable of replacing television's role as the primary source of voters' knowledge of the candidate and his/her stands on key issues.

ABSTRACTS

This paper will analyze the ways in which mediation takes places in the context of the U.S. presidential debates in the recent election, and how different forms of mediation influence the language specific to this task. The first dimension focused upon will be the language of the moderator: this study will attempt to establish a correlation between the format of each debate, the moderator's role and the language he uses to negotiate his position as mediator in the respective formats. The second part of this paper will then turn to how the candidates mediate their respective electoral messages through the careful use and placement of certain forms of political rhetoric. Last but not least, several examples of how each candidate mediates –through language and/or innuendo– his image of future president will be presented and analyzed.

Lors de chaque campagne électorale aux États-Unis, les débats télévisés des candidats à la Présidence et à la Vice-Présidence constituent des moments médiatiques importants. À l'opposé de la publicité électorale dans laquelle « tous les coups sont permis », le débat télévisuel répond à des critères très stricts : chaque format de débat impose aux participants des règles particulières allant de la position physique de chaque intervenant (assis, debout, etc.) au temps de parole et au droit (ou pas) de réponse. Dans cette communication, nous proposons d'étudier les différentes formes que prend la langue de la médiation, que ce soit celle du médiateur/journaliste à qui revient la tâche de gérer le déroulement des échanges, ou celle des candidats eux-mêmes qui participent activement à l'arbitrage et à la médiation du débat dans la lutte pour la meilleure image médiatique possible.

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Mots-clés: campagne présidentielle, débat télévisé, discours politique, image médiatique, langue de médiation, réseau
Keywords: debate format, language of mediation, moderator, network of intertextual reference, political discourse, presidential campaign (U.S.), televisual image, televized debate

AUTHOR

DONNA ANDRÉOLLE

Donna Andréolle est maître de conférences en Langues étrangères appliquées à l'Université Stendhal Grenoble 3. Elle s'intéresse à trois grands domaines de recherche : l'imaginaire culturel américain tel qu'il se manifeste dans la culture populaire, notamment les représentations de la société américaine dans la science fiction féminine depuis 1965 et dans le cinéma hollywoodien des années 90 ; le discours politique américain dans ses diverses formes médiatiques depuis la campagne de Bill Clinton en 1992. En recherche appliquée, elle s'intéresse à la dimension

culturelle de la communication professionnelle et construit actuellement un site Internet pour l'enseignement interactif de la politique américaine. dandreolle@gmail.com